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ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF LIFE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COPING HUMOR, NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS, AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN AMERICAN AND ISRAELI COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Thesis Presented

by

YARIV HOFSTEIN

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COPING HUMOR, NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS, AND LIFE SATISFACTION IN AMERICAN AND ISRAELI COLLEGE STUDENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An assessment of quality of life and happiness belongs to a perspective of psychology known as the positive mental health approach (Kahneman, Diener & Schwartz, 1999). This perspective explores the role of adaptive processes in development and personality. However, the goal of assessing satisfaction with life goes beyond the scope of academic psychology. The ability to identify and assess factors that influence life satisfaction has implications for our everyday lives.

Emphasizing the great discrepancy between an intuitive understanding of the concept of happiness and the ultimate goal, which is to discover the components of objective happiness, Kahneman (1999) described four levels for assessing happiness. The first is instant gratification; that is, being happy or satisfied as a result of experiencing a specific event. Second, Happiness can be assessed as remembered gratification, a retrospective assessment related to an event or an experience in the past. The third level of assessment is satisfaction related to broader spheres of a person's life such as work or family. Fourth, in the highest level of integration are dimensions such as happiness or well-being inclusive of all spheres of life.

The goal of the current study is to conduct a cross-cultural explorative investigation of factors that influence global life satisfaction. Specifically, this study will focus on sense of humor, coping humor and negative life events as predictors of life satisfaction in individuals from two countries, Israel and the U.S. Next, I discuss major advancements in the research of life satisfaction.

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (henceforth SWB) is the general assessment of an individual's quality of life in terms of happiness and satisfaction. Emphasizing the subjectivity and individuality inherent in this concept, Shin and Johnson (1978) defined SWB as a global assessment of quality of life according to individually chosen criteria.

Much knowledge has accumulated on the nature and meaning of SWB, its components, and its relationship with other psychological variables since Wilson concluded in 1967 that a happy person is someone who is young, healthy, educated, extraverted, optimistic, free of worries, religious, married, and who has high self esteem and modest ambitions.

SWB consists of both affective and cognitive assessments. According to Kozma et al. (2000), the approach that focuses on affective assessments perceives happiness as the dominance of positive affect over negative affect. According to Frijda (1999), the affective roots of SWB stem from several sources. First of all, people's feelings are probably the direct result of events in their lives. Second, feelings directly affect our functioning in the environment as well as our interactions with others. These interactions in turn affect our feelings. Finally, feelings have a complex effect on individuals' self-image by affecting other individuals and the relationship with them.

Assessing SWB from a positive-negative affect perspective has an intuitive appeal. This approach holds that a satisfied, happy person would mostly demonstrate positive affect, and that a dissatisfied and miserable person would mostly demonstrate negative affect. The notion that positive and negative affect are two different dimensions, and should, therefore, be measured separately was suggested by Brandburn and Caplovitz

(1965). Bradburn (1969) subsequently introduced an affect balance model of SWB, according to which happiness is the function of a balance between the two affects.

Regarding the ability to separate positive and negative affects, Diener and Emmons (1984) found that positive and negative affect become increasingly distinguished as the time frame of measurement increases. Similarly, Diener, Smith, and Fujita (1995) showed that the positive and negative dimensions of affect are both correlated and clearly separated. The intuitive notion that people who demonstrate high levels of positive affect will inevitably demonstrate low levels of negative affect was refuted by Shmotkin (1998) who presented a typological model that relates to the independent and simultaneous existence of both affects in the same individual. According to this model, the lack of a dependency between the two affects is exemplified in the existence of four distinct combinations of positive and negative affect in individuals. In addition to individual types indicating compatibility such as the happy type (a high positive affect and a low negative affect), and the unhappy type (a high negative affect and a low positive affect), Shmotkin found evidence for, presumably, incompatible types that ostensibly demonstrate high levels of both affects or low levels of both affects.

As previously noted , the second approach to measuring SWB focuses on general cognitive assessments such as general satisfaction with life (e.g. Cantril, 1965), and more specific cognitive assessments such as satisfaction with work, family, health, economic situation, and social affiliation (e.g. Kozma et al,. 2000). Attempts to integrate the affective and cognitive dimensions of life satisfaction were made by Kozma and Stones (1980). They view SWB as a multi-dimensional concept containing both long and short-term affective and cognitive assessments. Kozma and Stones (1980) developed a measure

that combined elements for measuring positive and negative affects with elements that measure cognitive assessments such as satisfaction. They found evidence for the existence of both components at the time of measurement.

What is it than that makes some people more satisfied with their lives than others? Can we identify the factors that enhance life satisfaction?

Subjective Well-Being Theories. In the last three decades psychologists explored many different life domains in an attempt to find the ultimate predictor of life satisfaction or happiness. Diener and Lucas (2000) suggest that research on predictors and enhancers of SWB could be divided to theories of needs, theories of culture, and theories of purpose.

The theoretical approach that focuses on needs perceives life satisfaction as pendant on achieving universal needs, goals, or milestones in life. Such approach naturally focuses on factors that are common to most or all human beings, and is based on the hypothesis that there is a hierarchy of biological, material, and psychological needs (e.g. Maslow, 1954). Several aspects of life were theorized to be important for fulfilling these needs. Among the more extensively researched factors we can find income, health, religion, marriage, and education.

Research shows consistent evidence that supports the relationship between fulfillment of needs and SWB. With regard to health, an analysis of the relationship between general health and SWB reveals an average correlation of 0.34 (Okun et al., 1984). With regard to income, a number of studies revealed a weak but clear correlation between income and SWB (Diener et al., 1993; Veenhoven, 1994a). Other studies did not find such a correlation (Clarek & Oswald, 1994). Diener et al (1999) conclude that there is little evidence for a causal path from income to SWB. Furthermore, it appears that

wealthy people are only somewhat happier than poor people. Regarding faith and religion, Gartner, Larson, and Allen (1991) found evidence indicating a positive relationship between religion and mental health. With regard to marriage, widespread surveys have found that married people have higher life satisfaction than people who have never married (Diener et al., 1999). Regarding education, there appears to be a weak but consistent correlation between SWB and education. For example, Campbell et al. (1976) found an average correlation of 0.13 between education and SWB, but noted the possibility that part of the relationship stems from the co-variation between education, occupation, and income.

From the above evidence it appears that overall, demographic variables are only moderately associated with SWB. Argyle (1999) concludes that external factors explain only 15% of the variance in SWB reports. It appears that while there is some valance to theories of needs, other more individual factors influence individual levels of life satisfaction. According to the Theory of Relative Standards (Diener & Lucas, 2000), needs affect SWB indirectly through the comparisons people make with their environment. Thus, in order to evaluate our own situation, we must check to see if "the neighbor's grass is greener". Michalos (1985) maintained that people compare themselves with many standards that include other people, conditions in their past, ambitions, and ideals. The underlying notion concerning the relationship between happiness and social comparison is that people tend to feel better about themselves and their lives if someone in their environment is in a worse position.

An additional individual factor that has been found to be related to life satisfaction is purposes. Diener and Lucas, (2000), maintain that purposes constitute

ambitions and goals. Purposes are not *just* future expectations but rather, expectations that someone is ready to work for. Ross, Eyman and Kishchuk (1986) found that people use their purposes as anchors when judging their satisfaction. An upward comparison with a purpose inevitably leads to lower levels of happiness. In support of the theory of purposes, Diener & Fujita (1995) found that traits and characteristics that are relevant to purposes are more related to SWB levels than traits and characteristics that are not connected to their purposes. Thus, for instance, a talent for cooking is likely to be more important to the happiness of someone who is striving to become a chef than it is for someone who wishes to become a car mechanic.

According to cultural theories differences in SWB levels between individuals are likely to be expressed as cultural differences between different groups. Cultural differences are likely to find expression in the dissimilar importance that is attached to different components of happiness and satisfaction by people of different cultures and nations. I discuss cultural components of SWB in more detail later in this manuscript.

Failure to establish environmental and demographic factors as strong predictors of SWB naturally raises the question of personality as a predictor of life satisfaction. Are people born with the tendency to be happy or unhappy?

I now turn to discuss evidence for the role personality plays in predicting life satisfaction.

Subjective Well-Being and Personality. There is some evidence supporting the temporal nature of SWB. For example, Schwartz and Strack, (1991) found effects for temporary factors such as current mood and even the weather. Despite these temporary effects, SWB was found to be moderately stable across situations (Diener & Larsen, 1984) and throughout life (Costa & McCrae, 1988). Diener et al (1999) note, that

personality is one of the strongest and most stable predictors of SWB. Models associating personality with SWB are based on the set point perspective according to which people are born with a tendency to be either happy or unhappy.

The evidence relating SWB to personality comes form two lines of research, heredity studies and personality traits studies. Regarding heredity, in a reanalysis of a study of monozygotic and dizygotic twins undertaken by Lykken and Tellegen (1996), heredity explained about 40% of the variance in positive affect and about 55% of the variance in the negative affect. Note that the capacity of heredity to explain differences of SWB is primarily found in the portion of the variance that is responsible for affect stability over long periods of time. The capacity of heredity to explain variance in short time frames was found to be significantly lower.

In a study undertaken to examine whether SWB is trait like, or at least connected with personality factors, Magnus and Diener (1991) found that personality variables successfully predicted levels of SWB within a time frame of 4 years. Additionally, Diener and Larsen (1984) found that SWB is not only stabile across time but also consistent across different situations such work and leisure.

Findings regarding the stability, consistency and hereditary basis of SWB led some researchers to believe that happiness is a trait (Costa McCrae & Zonderman, 1987). It is important to note that this view has been criticized by some researchers (e.g. Veenhoven, 1994b) that claim that there is some evidence that happiness does change over time as and is influenced by fortune and adversity. Diener et al (1999) conclude that SWB contains both trait-like and state-like propertics.

Regarding the relationship between SWB and specific personality traits, research indicates positive correlations of about 0.7 between positive affect and extraversion, and between negative affect and neuroticism (Lucas et al., 1998). These strong, stable correlations led Watson and Clark (1997) to redefine neuroticism as a negative affectivity and to suggest that positive affectivity forms the core of extraversion. Similarly, Lucas, Diener, and Suh (1996) found a positive correlation between self-esteem and optimism and between a positive affect and satisfaction.

When comparing personality and factors such as needs or goals as predictors of life satisfaction it appears that the influence of the former is much stronger. The strong association between personality and life satisfaction implies that individuals (to some extent) posses baseline levels of happiness and life satisfaction. It is possible that within this baseline level accomplishment, needs and goals play a moderate role. This may be a comforting realization in a world in which there so few are fortunate enough to be born in countries where needs and goals other than the most basic can be fulfilled. Furthermore, the evolutionary advantage of satisfaction and happiness to be stable across external factors seem obvious.

Needs, goals and personality are all long term and relatively sable factors of our lives. However human beings' lives are influenced by sudden changes that may have significant impact, and may necessitate considerable adjustment. To what extant do these changes, otherwise known as life events, influence our life satisfaction?

Subjective Well-Being and Life Events. Life in the twenty-first century is dynamic and unpredictable. Surprising events, whether joyful or tragic, can occur at any time and with no or little notice. These events may range from becoming suddenly rich to

suffering devastating losses. The prevailing belief that relates misery with exposure to negative life events was partly refuted by Brickman, Boats and Janoff-Bulman's (1978) famous study of lottery winners and accident victims. Their findings revealed that when happiness levels of lottery winners and paralyzed accident victims were measured in comparison with control groups, the differences were surprisingly small. This finding suggests that people have an astonishing capacity for adjustment and coping.

We are all familiar with people who have suffered blows in life and who, despite this, have managed to preserve a sense of satisfaction and happiness. In contrast, we can all think of people to whom fate has been kind and who are, nonetheless, miserable and bitter. One goal of the current study is to explore why negative life events influence different people in different ways. Why is it that, when faced with misfortune, some people are able to recuperate and adapt while other become miserable and bitter?

The ability or inability to cope with negative or positive life events and the effect of these events on SWB belong to the domain of hedonic adaptation (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). In the broadest sense, adaptation relates to any action, process or mechanism that diminishes the effect (physiological or psychological) of stimuli. For example, in order to avoid the unpleasant sensation that accompanies loud, incessant noise, one can use ear plugs that block out the noise and cancel the physiological and emotional aspects of such abrasive stimulation (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999).

Hedonic adaptation includes a number of processes that are essentially cognitive such as changes in values, areas of interest, goals and ambitions. According to this model, the human capacity for implementing adaptive processes to cope with events in our environment fulfills a protective function of diminishing the effect of external factors.

Models such hedonic adaptation imply that human beings possess mechanisms that attenuate the influence of life events on base line levels of SWB. Thus, the influence of such events should be limited and temporal rather than long lasting. It appears that there is empirical evidence for such limited influence.

Most of the research on the relationship between life events and SWB focuses negative or undesired events. There are many examples of the capacity for adaptation demonstrated by people in the face of negative events such as illness or injury. In a study of people who were paralyzed following an accident, Silver (1983) found that fear and sadness were the prevailing emotions a week after the accident that caused the paralysis. However, these emotions were replaced by a dominant positive affect after the eighth week following the accident. Schulz and Decker (1985) interviewed elderly and middle-aged people with a paraplegic and found levels of well being that were only slightly lower than those of control groups. Tyc (1992) found no difference in the quality of life or in the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms among young individuals who had lost limbs as a result of cancer. Kraus and Sternberg (1997) found evidence support the common belief that time heals. In their study, the period of time that passed since the time of the accident was the best predictor of SWB among individuals with irreversible spinal injuries.

The conclusion that adversity does not necessarily involve prolonged periods of misery received support from longitudinal studies. Suh, Diener and Fujita (1996) found a positive correlation between positive life events and levels of SWB and negative correlation between negative life events and SWB. Interestingly, they found that only recent (less than six months prior to measurement) life events were correlated with SWB.

The impact and magnitude of the effect of life events in their study dropped dramatically in subsequent measurements of SWB. The participants in this study apparently showed a remarkable ability to adapt and to return to baseline levels of SWB. Such ability could possibly be a result of some sort of coping or defense mechanism that enables people to move on and to continue to maintain satisfactory lives despite temporary setbacks.

One notable limitation for such studies is that some adverse life events, such as suicide attempts, presumably requiring longer adaptation, showed very low base rate. It is possible therefore that some adverse life events that were not explored due to this low base rate show a more pervasive and prolonged influence on levels of SWB.

One such life event, for which findings appear to be far less encouraging, is chronic or progressive disease. For example, patients had less success in adjusting to diseases such as multiple sclerosis and degenerative syndrome (Antonak & Livneh, 1995; Smith & Wallston, 1992). Similarly, a study of families of Alzheimer patients found a consistent deterioration in the level of SWB as a function of the progress of the disease, with no signs of adaptation (Vitaliano et al, 1990). The methodological problem in such studies is the difficulty to separate affects of a lack of adjustment from affects of deterioration and a worsening situation on the quality of lives of both the families and the patients.

One of the most stressful and difficult life events to cope with is the death of close family member (Holmes & Rahe 1967). Past research indicates that people who have lost a child or a spouse suffer lengthy periods of grieving (Stroebe et al., 1996; Weiss, 1987). However, less difficulty was experienced with regard to the loss of friends or siblings. Grieving is particularly hard when the loss is unexpected (Wortman & Silver, 1987).

Interestingly, reactions of grieving although widespread are not universal or uniform in strength or length. For example, Wortman and Silver (1993) found that 30% of the parents, who had lost a child in infancy, did not demonstrate any signs of mourning at any time after the event. They maintain that the absence of grieving shortly after a loss is a positive indication of well being in the long term. In addition, there are studies that challenge the prevailing notion that the process of recovery from a loss is long or progresses in stages (Wortman et al., 1993, Strobe et. al 1993, Wortman & Silver 2001).

In a recent study Bonanno et al (2002) demonstrated that resilience, defined as the absence of distress, was the most typical type of coping with conjugal bereavement. Bonanno (2002) posits that absence of grieving after loss may indicate resilience and quick adjustment rather than maladaptive coping or denial. In addition he suggests that individuals coping with conjugal bereavement may actually show improved psychological health following the death of a spouse due to the relief of the stress involved in coping with chronically stressful situations (Bonanno, 2002). It is possible that the differences in reaction to loss may stem from quality of the relationship with the deceased stable and from individual differences such as and world view.

Overall, research shows overwhelming support for the assumption that for most individuals the prevailing notion that "life goes on" is much more than just a platitude. However, there is some evidence that this may not be true for all people and in every situation. For example Lyubomirsky and Tucker (1998) found that self reported happy college students tended to think about both positive and negative life events more favorably and adaptively than self reported unhappy students.

Combined with the evidence presented earlier on the strong and stable relationship between personality and SWB these findings point that personality characteristics may moderate the influence of life event on SWB. If so, than the next question should be what specific personality characteristics serve as "gate keepers" that help us in maintaining stable levels of SWB. The current study will explore the possibility that sense of humor may act as such protective trait. I now continue to present the theoretical and empirical evidence that supports the idea that sense of humor may be associated with life satisfaction and serve as protective personality trait when facing adversity.

Humor

Humor is an inseparable part of human life. We all use of humor from an early age. There are few people, if any, who have no idea whatsoever about the meaning of the concept. Despite, and perhaps because, of the fact that humor is such an accepted and familiar concept, there is no consensus among laypersons or professionals with regard to the precise meaning of the concept. Following, is a review of some of the major theoretical advancements in the research of humor. The goal of this review is to provide background on the important influence of humor on human life. Furthermore, my intention is to demonstrate and justify why humor should be viewed as meaningful and independent construct in psychological research.

Ziv (1984) notes that over one hundred theories concerning the concept of humor and its meaning have been suggested by theoreticians from spheres as diverse as philosophy, literature, art, psychology, and education. Ruch (1998) explains that the

difficulty in defining the concept stems directly from the lack of a consensus regarding what it includes.

Some attempts to explain the phenomenon of humor focus on its abstractness. For example, Thorson (1985) maintains that humor constitutes so many qualities that it is difficult to define. According to Latta (1999), the human difficulty in defining humor accurately resembles Stone Age humans' difficulty in understanding what a star is. That is, although seeing it innumerable times, It was impossible to know its exact components or what it truly is. Similarly, according to McGhee (1979), humor, like beauty, is a quality in the mind of a person and not in the real world.

A more practical approach to in defining humor focuses on its components and its purpose. According to Martin (2000), humor is a complex concept that incorporates cognitive, emotional, behavioral, psycho-physiological, and cultural aspects. The concept of humor is likely to relate to a stimulus (such as comedy), to a cognitive-emotional process (perceiving something as funny), or to a response (a laugh or smile). According to Ziv (1984), the use of humor implies observing the world from a new and surprising angle with its own intrinsic logic.

Attempts to find a definition of humor that covers all its aspects and meanings failed, partially, because the concept of humor tends to be parallel to, and become confused with concepts such as sense of humor and laughter.

In order to understand the phenomenon of humor, one must attempt to distinguish between three concepts: humor, sense of humor and laughter. The most important distinction would appear to be between laughter and humor. Laughter, the most widespread response to humor, consists of a behavioral respiratory pattern with distinct

psycho-physiological correlates (Martin, 2001). Ziv (1984) explains that, as opposed to laughter, a physiological phenomenon that can be observed and measured, humor is a theoretical, vague, and indistinguishable concept. Keith-Spiegel (1972) clarifies the distinction by maintaining that there are stimuli other than humor that tend to arouse the response of laughter, for example tickling.

Another issue in distinguishing between humor and laughter stems from the fact that although there is a consensus that the cognitive ability to create and perceive humor is unique to human beings, there is a controversy concerning the question of whether laughter is unique to human beings. Darwin (1872), for example, found laughter responses in monkeys. However, other early studies disagreed with the Darwinian position, maintaining that humans are the only creatures that laugh (Hazllit, 1910). Recent studies have discovered that laughter is both a primitive mechanism that we have in common with animals, and a response to the stimulation of the frontal lobes that only occurs in humans (Fried et al., 1998). Provine (1996) suggested that the difference between laughter as a primitive reflex and laughter as unique to human beings is found in the ability of human beings to develop a sense of humor and to laugh as a result of complex cognitive and linguistic stimuli. It appears that for other species, laughter is no more than a physiological response or the mimicking of sounds. Thus, while laughter is probably a phenomenon that may indicate that humor is present, the absence of laugher should not indicate the opposite.

Theories of Humor. Why do we laugh in certain situations and not in other? Why do we find some events, stories, or people amusing and others not? For thousands of years, ever since the days of the Greek philosophers, theories have been proposed to

explain the meaning of humor, the emotional function it fulfills, and its underlying purposes.

Martin (1998) divides the many existing theories proposed for understanding and studying the functions of humor into three main theoretical groups: superiority theorics, incongruity theories, and psychoanalytical theories.

Superiority theories are the most ancient theories of humor. These theories arc based on the perception of humor as an aggressive reaction. That is, humor requires that its creator perceives himself as superior to the subject of the joke. For example, Plato maintained that we laugh at shortcomings, weaknesses, stupidity and the infirmities of those who are inferior and helpless. Aristotle, who accepted Plato's view of humor, added an important distinction between two different types of humor, comedy, which is general humor, and irony, humor directed at a particular person.

A more recent superiority approach can be found Hobbs' idea of "Sudden Glory". Hobbs posits that the passion for laughter is intrinsic to the sense of glory that we feel as a result of our superiority. According to Hobbs (cited in Piddington, 1963), there are two kinds of laughter: The first, laughing at oneself at the ability to rise above our expectations. The other type is laughter at the inferiority and absurdity of others.

Another theory that perceives humor as a source of superiority is that of Rapp (1949), who suggested that humor evolved from laughter after victory in the battlefield through jeering, humiliation, sneering, word plays, jokes, and riddles. Similarly, Gruner (1979) maintained that jeering is the essential component of any type of humor. He adds that the necessary components for the forming of humor constitute a combination of a loser, the subject of the humor, and the suddenness of the loss.

Psychoanalytical theories of humor have a place of honor among humor theories as being the first attempt to understand the psychological roots of the humor phenomenon. According to Cohen (1994), psychoanalytical theories emphasize the saving of emotional energy, the satisfaction of unconscious, primary sexual and aggressive urges, and the legitimization of expressions of forbidden content.

According to Freud (1928), any form of humor represents the saving of emotional energy for the creator, as well as for the listener. Specifically, expressing your emotion in the form of a joke has less emotional toll than dealing with its underlying meaning. It is not surprising therefore, that Freud viewed humor as the most mature of all defense mechanisms. According to Freud, humor takes place in situations in which people usually experience negative feelings such as fear, sadness, or anger. Perceiving the contradictory or ridiculous components of a situation allows us to avoid experiencing negative feelings. Humor, therefore, is the joy of the release of energy that otherwise would have been connected to the negative aspects of a situation. Similarly, Ziv (1984) perceives humor as serving a natural aggressive function intrinsic to human beings that directs this aggression into acceptable paths.

Incongruity theories focus on the cognitive aspects of humor. Followers of this approach perceive incongruity as the main characteristic of humor (Monro, 1988). Kostler (1964) perceives the essence of humor as a connecting between two associations or as perceiving incongruent events.

The notion that the essence of humor is the satisfaction of deciphering the intent of a humorous message was emphasized by Ziv (1984) who offered a six-stage cognitive model for the understanding and appreciation of humor.

Preparation: initially the creator of humor transfers a message that what he is about to say cannot be taken seriously.

The content of a joke: most jokes have three stages, background, content, and a punch line.

Tension and imbalance: the listener experiences discomfort and tension due to the incompatibility between the content and the punch line.

Cognitive process: the purpose of this process is to resolve the incompatibility and restore balance.

Cognitive pleasure: in this stage the listener experiences satisfaction as a result of a successful solution.

Functional pleasure: Finally the listener experiences pleasure in accordance with the function fulfilled by the joke (for instance, ignoring a sexual or social taboo).

Social Aspects of Humor. Take a moment to think about your last enjoyable social gathering. Now, try to think of the reasons why it was enjoyable. It's safe to assume that some aspect of humor was involved. It is hard to imagine a friendly and pleasant encounter between people without humor. According to some social psychologists, the main function of humor is social. The social aspect is primarily emphasized by the fact that we laugh more with friends than we do with strangers (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972). Svebak (1974a) emphasizes another aspect, perceiving humor as a mechanism that connects the individual's grasp of reality with that of society. Humor, according to this approach, is an indirect way through which the individual can express her personal, irrational world.

An important aspect of social humor is its serving as mean of communication between an individual and a group. According to Martineau (1972), humor constitutes the foundation of group interaction. This approach was further developed by Ziv (1984), who perceived humor as a tool of acceptance into a group, winning group affection, avoiding sanctions, defining a sense of affiliation, and increasing the unity of a group. Whether or not we agree with a specific view of the social function of humor, it appears that humor is undoubtedly one of the more prevalent aspects of social encounters.

Sense of Humor. The term "sense of humor" relates to humor being a personality trait or distinguishing variable between individuals (Ruch, 1998). Many use the expression "he has a sense of humor" or "she has no sense of humor" when characterizing others. While we the exact definition of sense of humor may be evasive, most people won't struggle to recognize its presence. Not surprisingly, there is a lack of consensus among experts on what exactly sense of humor constitutes. According to Eysenck (1972) when we say that a person "has a sense of humor" we may imply three different things. First, this person may laugh at the same things we laugh at. Second, this person may laugh at a variety of things and can be easily amused and, third, this person may have a tendency amuse other people.

A dimensional approach to sense of humor was taken by Ziv (1984) who defines it as an openness and willingness to see things in a way that arouses laughter or amusement. According to Ziv the two dimensions of sense of humor are creation and appreciation.

Creation of humor refers to the ability to grasp and express relations between objects or ideas in an unusual way. This ability, which is translated into words or physical

expressions, makes the other person, to whom the message is directed, laugh or smile. The second dimension, appreciation of humor, reflects an understanding and a capacity for enjoying a humorous message. I believe that this distinction is extremely valuable since almost all people appear to be able to appreciate humor, at least to some extent. At the same time, evidentially, fewer people posses the talent of creating humor.

The most comprehensive attempt to describe the components of sense of humor was taken by Hehl and Ruch (1985), who divide the interpersonal differences in sense of humor into the following components: the extent to which people understand jokes and other humorous stimuli; the way in which they express humor both quantitatively and qualitatively; peoples' ability to create comments or humorous insights, appreciation of a variety of jokes, amusing films, and other humorous materials; the extent to which they actively seek sources of humor and laughter; the extent to which people's memory is devoted to jokes or funny events; individuals' tendency to use humor as a defense mechanism.

The above definitions clearly suggest that sense of humor can be conceptualized as a stable trait-like tendency. The view of sense of humor as a personality characteristic naturally raises the question of the relationship between sense of humor and other personality characteristics, as well as the role it plays in models of personality.

Sense of Humor and Personality. Few attempts have been made to position sense of humor within comprehensive models of personality. These models presume that all relevant personality traits can be defined through a limited number of primary traits. It is important to note that the underlying assumption behind these attempts is that sense of humor is in itself a distinguishable trait (Martin, 1998). Guilford's (1976) personality

taxonomy identified thirteen primary components of the personality. The component known as lack of control was found to be highly correlated with humor. This component was also associated with happiness, impulsiveness and lightheadedness.

Cattlel's model (1947) included a comprehensive classification of personality traits obtained by means of factor analysis. From these components, 'cheerful', 'enthusiastic', and 'witty' had the strongest association with humor. In the most accepted and widely used model of personality, the "Five Factor" model (e.g. Costa and McRae, 1988), Sense of humor was found to be associated with extraversion, and manifested as talkativeness, assertiveness and energetic behavior. Specific humorous qualities that were found to be associated with extraversion are 'witty' and 'funny' (John, 1990).

A review of the literature on humor as a personality characteristic reveals that surprisingly few theories of personality dealt with sense of humor in a sufficient way. The scarcity of research on the relationship between sense of humor and personality is somewhat surprising due the important place humor posses in other disciplines such at literature and philosophy as well as the evident impotence of humor in human interactions. There is little doubt that more research on humor as personality characteristic is needed to explore and understand individual differences in this trait.

Humor and Physiological Health. The ancient prevailing belief that laughter is healthy has recently inspired considerable research. Cousins's famous story (1976) of how he cured himself of cancer by means of laughter (and vitamin C) motivated researchers to examine the correlation between health and humor. Recently, the movie *Patch Adams* (1998) captured the true story of a man who dedicated his life to promoting

humor as a cure and who is responsible for the creation of a new profession in the health field known the medical clown

In recent years, the notion that humor and laughter may be beneficiary to physical health has resulted in an outburst of research (Martin, 2001). The idea that psychological qualities, that are not primarily physiological, would directly or indirectly affect physiological measurements and health forms the basis of a branch of psychology known as Health Psychology.

Since the 1930's, scientists have been preoccupied with the hypothesis that personality factors and different styles of coping play a role in the development of illness (Taylor, 1990). Early research focused on the question of whether or not personality traits are associated with health conditions in general, as well as with specific illnesses. A meta-analysis of relevant studies revealed that depression, anxiety, and, to some extent, hostility, are correlated with the development of a variety of illnesses, such as heart disease, asthma, headaches, ulcers and arthritis (Friedman & Booth-Kewley, 1978).

In what ways do humor and laughter affect health? Martin (2001), in a review of the literature regarding the correlation between humor and health since the 1960's, presents mixed picture according to which there is evidence to support the positive effects of humor on some of the health and physiological variables. According to Martin the majority of research focused on the positive effects of humor on the immune system, pain and its threshold, blood pressure, and longevity.

Berk (2001) notes that the physiological and psychological aspects involved in responses to laughter are likely to a have a positivc effect on older adults and relieve symptoms that are unique to old age. For example, laughter, particularly a healthy, rolling

laugher, provides much needed exercise for facial muscles, respiratory muscles, and even skeleton and stomach muscles.

Several mechanisms have been suggested in an attempt to understand the correlation between health and humor. First, it is possible that there is a direct physiological effect whereby laughter directly affects muscles, immunity, and respiration by changing the levels of hormones such as cortisol (Hubert et al., 1993). Another plausible explanation is that the effects of humor on health stem from its moderating effect on stress. This approach is different from the former in that it involves cognitive processes. Apparently, humor diminishes stress by providing a more positive and adaptive viewpoint about life situations that would usually cause levels of stress. This approach relies on evidence that shows a strong association between stress and many types of illness such as heart disease and immune system ailments (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986; Martin et al, 1993).

The evidence presented on the benefits of humor for physical health naturally raises the question of the psychological effects of humor. The review of traditional views of humor and sense of humor implies that sense of humor is a distinguishable with functions that have been well known for thousands of years. Naturally this leads to more questions. Can sense of humor be characterized as positive psychological trait? Does humorous tendency predict general psychological well being? Next, I consider some of the major advances in the research on the psychological effects of humor.

Psychological Effects of Humor. In recent years a variety of studies have attempted to investigate the psychological effects of humor. There is plentiful evidence to suggest that sense of humor carries some psychological benefit. For example, people with

a tendency toward humor enjoy a better interaction with their environment (Kuiper, Martin, & Olinger, 1993). They also achieve greater interpersonal intimacy and are less lonely (Hampes, 1992). In addition, these individuals have been found to have a higher self-esteem than others and to make more positive cognitive judgments (Kuiper et al., 1995). Kuiper and Martin (1998) found a correlation between sense of humor and positive characteristics such as self acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, growth and self-fulfillment. According to Berk (2001) humor has been found to diminish the deleterious effects of anxiety, tension, stress, loneliness, and depression, and to increase self-esteem, hope, energy, and sense of control.

Researchers attempted to explore the nature of the positive influences of sense of humor. For example, Lefcourt and Martin (1986) examined the effect of humor on stress and found that people who tend to use humor as a means of coping demonstrated less stress during negative events. In addition, they found that among those with a high tendency towards humor a lower correlation was found between mood disturbances and negative life events than among those with a low tendency towards humor. These findings suggest that sense of humor may be conceptualized as some sort of a defense or coping mechanism.

Sense of Humor as a Coping Mechanism. Several theories recognized humor as a defense or coping mechanism. Freud (1928) was the first to see humor as the highest of all mature defense mechanisms. The Freudian approach was further developed by Vaillant (1993, 2000), who maintained that humor allows the release of feelings without a sense of discomfort, and that mature humor allows individuals to look directly at what is painful.

Mishkinsky (1977) perceives humor as courage mechanism that like other defense mechanisms enables individuals to cope with the unpleasant aspects of reality. However, as opposed to other mechanisms, it is based on cognitive processes that do not resist or ignore reality. Humor allows a way of perceiving that emphasizes the absurd and the ridiculous in a situation without the use pathological processes. According to Ziv (1984), there are two types of humor as defense and coping mechanism. The first is "black humor" that includes laughter at the causes of fear such as death and illness. The second is "self deprecating humor", that is one of the most complex and mature forms of humor, requiring complex formal and intellectual cognition aimed at laughing at ones own shortcomings.

In what ways does the use of humor as a coping mechanism enable us to better cope with negative life events? According to Robinson (1983), in times of crisis and tragedy, humor may neutralize the emotional burden and constitute a useful way of dealing with the painful reality of threat and death. Juni (1999) maintains that humor enables the victim of adversity to regain a sense of psychological control over a situation in which the victim had neither real nor psychological control. Cohen (1984) posits that the ability to address fear humorously involves mental release, calming, and hope. Martin (1989, 1996) found that humor is likely to reduce the effects of negative life events by means of its contribution to efficient coping problems. It is possible that a greater sense of humor may contribute to a more positive orientation towards one's life experience. In one such demonstration Kuiper et al (1993) found that individuals with higher levels of coping humor were more likely to appraise an upcoming academic examination as a positive challenge rather than a negative threat.

The following example is presented to illustrate how humor as coping mechanism is implemented in the most extreme of circumstances. It is taken from the autobiography of Efraim Kishon (London & Kishon, 1993) a holocaust survivor and one of Israel's prominent humor writers. In his memoirs he describes an incident he witnessed at the time he was prisoner of the Nazis during World War II:

> Two rows of Jewish prisoners are marching through a snow field in Russia. Their clothes are torn, and whatever is left of their shoes is padded with paper and tied with wire. In one of the rows marched a famous cabaret artist named Halmi. In the other, marched Goldman a well know theater critic. In Budapest, before the war, they were known for their friendly rivalry. As the two groups approached, the men recognized each other, and Goldman who was already half dead, and without a single a tooth left in his mouth said to the frozen actor in aristocratic tone: " My dear friend, can you tell who your tailor is?" (p.153)

It is important to note that not all forms of humor are positive in nature. It is possible that humor does not always constitute a mature, adaptive coping mechanism. In some individuals humor may hide mental difficulties and great sadness, as one participant in a study of humor among Holocaust survivors reflected during her interview: "I'm like the sad clown who laughs on the outside but cries inside" (Hofstein, unpublished honors thesis 2000). Kuiper et al. (1998) note, that laughter can be expressed in a derogatory and demeaning fashion that includes downward comparison to others. Contradicting its adaptive, healthy aspects of humor, studies have found correlations between humor and a variety of mental disorders such as bi-polar disorder, hysteria, and schizophrenia (Forabosco, 1998).

In summary, it appears that sense of humor may be conceptualized as a strong protective personality characteristic. Specifically, by using humor as coping mechanism we are able to dilute some of the negative aspects of adversity. It is possible that by

gaining psychological control, by focusing on the funny or absurd aspect of the event we retain or regain, to some extent, happiness and satisfaction.

Sense of Humor and Subjective Well-Being. Conceptually, the relationship between humor and SWB may stem from a number of sources. First, sense of humor is viewed as a stable personality characteristic that includes a tendency to behave in ways that are related to it in a variety of situations (Ruch, 1996). It is therefore possible that the relationship between sense of humor and life satisfaction is mediated by other personality traits. Galloway and Cropley (1999) concluded that the effects of humor on mental states are apparently connected with humor being both a personality trait and a coping mechanism. That is, a person with a sense of humor will view more life situations as amusing or funny and fewer life situations as threatening or negative.

Conceptualizing sense of humor as a personality trait and exploring its relationship to SWB is supported by findings presented earlier with regard to cross situation stability and consistency of both SWB and sense of humor.

Second, sense of humor and SWB may be related because of the positive effect of humor physical health. As noted earlier it is possible that humor and laughter have positive influence on physical health. This positive influence may in turn translate to higher levels of SWB.

Third, the relationship between SWB and sense of humor may stem from Individuals' own conception of what well being constitutes. In a study of views of psychological well being in older adults Ryff (1989) found that participants emphasized sense of humor as one of the prominent characteristics of good adjustment. Additional support is provided from the finding that individuals with higher levels of coping humor

and laughter display a more positive view of self and greater congruence between their actual and ideal self concept (Kuiper & Martin, 1993)

Despite the intuitive appeal of humor and sense of humor as predictors of SWB only a handful of studies explored this relationship directly. Recent research on the relationship between aspects of life satisfaction and sense of humor found that humor is a significant predictor of life satisfaction and of quality of life in elderly (Panish, 2002; Foster, 1997) and college students (Weisse, 1997). Kuiper, Martin & Dance (1992) found that people with higher levels of sense of humor responded with more positive affect to positive life events and with less negative affect to negative life events. In a recent study conducted to asses the relationship between humor as a coping mechanism, health and life satisfaction, Celso et al. (2003) found that correlation between coping humor and life satisfaction. However, the results did not support the hypothesis of direct influence of coping humor on life satisfaction.

As noted research aimed to directly explore the influence of humor as a possible moderator on the influence of life events on SWB is relatively scarce. This seems somewhat surprising in light of the strong theoretical and intuitive appeal for such influence. The current study is an attempt to address some of the gap in the literature and to directly examine whether individuals with higher levels of coping humor also demonstrate higher levels of life satisfaction.

Multicultural Perspectives

As noted in the introduction, one goal of the current study is to compare Americans and Israelis on their relationships among humor, life events and Life

satisfaction. I now discuss a number of issues that are related such cross-cultural and cross-national comparison.

Comparing cultures on individual differences is complicated. There are numerous conceptual and methodological issues that need to be considered. One widely accepted dichotomy refers to the emic and etic approaches. Research from an emic point of view involves studying individual differences within a specific culture. Research using an etic approach, or cross-cultural research, examines and compares individuals across cultures. Van de Vijer and Leung (2001) discuss the problems inherent to the differences between the two approaches, and maintain that a blind exportation of measures and instruments from one culture to the other is unlikely to lead to any theoretical advancement. On the other hand without cross-cultural studies psychological theory and practice is confined to obvious cultural boundaries.

One important question that deserves consideration is whether cross-national level analysis is appropriate for cross-cultural research. Some nations are formed on cultural groupings that share significant cultural identifiers such as language, religion, heritage and history. Still other nations were only created as result of political compromises and peace agreements following wars. Both the U.S. and Israel are examples of countries in which there is a majority that share many cultural similarities and smaller, but significant, minority groups that differ in some or many aspects from the dominant culture.

According to Estes (1986), cultural homogencity could be measured as a combination of three factors: the largest percent of the population in the nation speaking the same language, the largest percent of the population who share the same, or similar ethnic or racial background, and the largest percent of the population who share the same

religion. Estes used the Cultural Homogeneity Scale, which combines these factors and ranges from 1, most homogenous to 5, most heterogeneous. Interestingly, both the U.S. and Israel received a score of 2, suggesting that both nations are quite homogeneous (Estes, 1986). For comparison purposes, most western European nations scored a 1on the same scale. The nations who were considered more heterogeneous were those with considerable amount of ethnical, lingual, or religion diversity such as Spain or Switzerland in Europe, and Singapore in Asia.

As an Israeli graduate student in America, cross-cultural psychological differences are daily reality. I am aware of them in conversations, social encounters and teaching experiences. It is therefore my firm belief that attempts to compare cultures and identify similarities and differences in psychological process and behavior should gain more attention than they currently do.

Psychological research has been dominated by western psychologists. The vast majority of psychological research is conducted in America. Bauserman (1997) noted that approximately 53.9 percent of all psychological publications available in the PsychInfo database originated from American institutions). Furthermore, Bauserman notes that about half of the psychologists in the world reside in the U.S. Currently, Israel is the only Middle Eastern nation represented in psychological publications in a manner that is proportionate to its population. Bauserman (1997) reports that 1.4 percent of all psychological publications originate from Israeli institutions. Other Middle Eastern countries are grossly underrepresented in psychological research.

The need for exploring psychological differences between Americans and Middle Easterners in the geo-political reality of 2004 seems more important than ever. Such research has potential implications for more than just enriching the scientific knowledge.

Only a handful of psychological studies compared Israelis and Americans up to date. Fewer yet had this comparison as their stated goal. After reviewing the relevant existent literature it is my tentative conclusion that, currently, there is no systematic comparison between the two countries, nor is there a unified theory that attempts to explain such differences. Note that the above relates only to direct comparison and not to similar studies that have been replicated in both countries. I cannot but think that this is somewhat surprising in light of the fact that the two countries have maintained strong cultural, financial, and political relations for the past six decades.

Despite the paucity of research, the few studies that have been conducted suggest that people from the two nations share both similarities and differences. For example, it appears that the widely accepted five factor structure of personality applies for both Israeli and American individuals (Hendriks et al., 2003). Another finding is that the relationships between child adjustment, parents' marital quality, and parenting styles are similar for American and Israeli Children. Keinan, 1987 found that both Americans and Israelis ranked work place sources of stress similarly. However, the actual levels of stress reported by Israelis were lower. In another study on psychological differences in the work place, Amrani-Cohen (1999) concluded that resilience among social workers, both American and Israeli, is positively associated with age, job maturity, and low levels of job ambiguity.

However, some studies were able to demonstrate significant cross- cultural differences. For example, in a study on relationships that involved dating games, Hetsroni (2000) demonstrated that American participants employed physical categories less often than Israeli participants. In the study discussed earlier, Keinan and Perlberg (1987) demonstrated that Israeli academics show significantly lower levels of stress than their American colleagues. Somewhat contradictory, Farley et al. (1978) found that overall, Israelis had more fearfulness in responding fear invoking stimuli. Israelis were also found to be less shy, and self aware, and to spend less time in introspection.

It is important to note that none of these studies includes a coherent theoretical framework for the comparison of Israelis and Americans. The anecdotic nature of the above evidence and the lack of conceptualization in the comparison of the two cultures raise the need for a possible conceptual criterion that could be used in comparing the two cultures.

Currently, the dominant cross–cultural paradigm in comparative psychology is to classify cultures on the Individualism-Collectivism Continuum, also known as independence-interdependence (Diener et al. 1995). In a recent review, Oyserman (2002) identified the core component of individualism as the assumption that individuals are independent from each other. According to Deiner et al. (1995), in individualistic societies, people are oriented toward their personal goals and desires and perceive the individual as the principal unit. Hofstede's (1980) seminal comparison of nations by studying international IBM workers defined the term individualism as incorporating a focus on rights above duties, a concern for one self and one's immediate family, an

emphasis on personal autonomy and self fulfillment, and the notion that one's identity is based on one's personal accomplishments.

The core of collectivism is the assumption that groups bind and mutually obligate individuals. People in collectivistic societies perceive the group as of primary importance, and focus their attention on achieving the group's goals. The person in a collectivistic society is simply a component of the group.

Next, I examine the possibility of conceptualizing the differences between the American society and Israeli society in terms of individualism-collectivism (henceforth Ind-Col). Individualism is the hallmark of American society. Oyserman (2002) notes, that for contemporary Americans being individualistic is not only a good thing but also the quintessential American "thing". Recent work questioned the pervasive notion that America is the ultimate individualistic society and presented evidence that on some measures of Ind-Col Americans score as more collectivistic than Asians (e.g. Voronov & Singer, 2002). Still, world wide surveys and experts' opinion on the topic rate the U.S. as the single most Individualistic nation in the world. In a survey of 55 countries, compiled and reported by Veenhoven (1993), that used Ind-Col continuum of 1- Most collectivistic and 10- most individualistic, the U.S. was ranked as the most individualistic country, and the only country in the survey to score a 10 on the scale.

In comparison, assessing Israeli society on the Ind-Col continuum seems much more complicated. First, it is important to note Ind-Col continuums are much more useful for assessing the differences between clearly individualistic and clearly collectivistic countries than for assessing countries that have both distinct individualistic components and distinct collectivistic components such as Israel. Among Middle

Eastern countries, usually ranked as highly collectivistic, Israel is an anomaly. The dominant forces in establishing the state of Israel were western. However, while Zionism is clearly rooted in ideas such European enlightenment and liberalism, the existence of tension between the collective and the individual in Israel is evident. First, this tension stems from the existence of both individualistic and collectivistic philosophies in the Jewish religion and tradition. Second, an early tendency towards collectivism in Israel was clearly influenced by Russian socialism. The clearest manifestation of the collectivistic ideal in the early years was the Israeli collective, better known as the Kibbutz.

One factor that contributes to the Ind-Col duality in Israeli society is its ethnic structure. While the majority of the Jewish pre-Israel settlement in Palestine was European, the immigration waves in the 1950's changed the demographic structure of Israeli society. Until recently, the majority of the Jewish population in Israel consisted of oriental Jews mainly from Arabic and Islamic countries. The recent outburst of Russian immigrants since the early 1990's complicated matters even further, adding to the Israeli population a large component of citizens from the collapsing Soviet bloc. The majority of these immigrants share a clear collectivistic educational background. About 16% of all Israeli citizens are Arabs who differ from the majority of Jewish population in both religion (Islam and Christianity) and language (mostly Arabic).

To complicate matters even further, Israel is constantly involved in major political violent conflict with its neighbors as well as with its Arabic citizens. Furthermore, significant parts of the population are involved with military service in some form. This

sort existential battle maintains a relatively high level of a sense of "we" which maintains a collectivistic sense in the Israeli society.

In an accurate, but rather bleak, description of factors contributing to changes in the fabric of the Israeli society since the late 1940's, Ezrahi (2001) concludes that decades of normative collectivism have left Israelis cut off from the notion of selves that are differentiated from the collective, which is dominant in other western countries. According to Ezrahi, Israeli individualism is not the normative individualism prevalent in the west, but rather the kind that evolved from the fragmentation of the collectivism or, a "flat individualism".

Research suggests that Israel could be viewed as moderately individualistic. There are several factors that are consistently found related to the Ind-Col continuum. They include purchase power, national growth, and income. Israel is consistently ranked midway between highly individualistic and highly collectivistic nations on scales measuring these factors. In an international survey (Veenhoven, 1993), Israel scored a 6 on a Ind-Col scale ranging between 0-copmpletly a collectivistic and 10 – completely individualistic; unmistakably below counties such as the U.S , Great- Britain and Canada (nations scoring 9 or 10), but clearly above quintessential collectivistic countries such as South-Korea and China (both scoring a 2).

To the best of my knowledge, only two psychological empirical sources measured Ind-Col in Israel. The results of both studies seem to support the claim that Israeli society is indeed a mixture of individualism and collectivism (Oyserman, 1993; Erez & Earley, 1987). Oyserman's study also addressed the duality of the Israeli society in comparing Arab-Israeli, and Jewish-Israeli students. Surprisingly, results suggested that

individualism and collectivism are two separate dimensions. Arab-Israelis were higher than Jewish-Israelis on both the individualistic dimension of the scale and the collectivistic dimension of the scale.

To summarize, it appears that there is enough evidence to justify an *a priori* assumption that Israeli society, is less individualistic than American society. This assumption will be used as framework for comparing Israelis and Americans.

Multicultural Perspectives of Subjective Well-Being. International surveys of life satisfaction demonstrate that individuals from different nations differ in their levels of life satisfaction (e.g. Deiner, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Furthermore, it seems that across countries, different factors influence SWB (Veenhoven, 1993; Diener Oishi & Lucas, 2003). As noted earlier, a large number of predictors, both objective, (such as demographic variables), and subjective (such as wishes, goals, and personality characteristics), can determine levels of life satisfaction. Cross national differences in any of these factors may lead to different levels of expressed happiness and satisfaction with life.

Measuring life satisfaction across cultures or nations is complex. One methodological issue in comparing SWB across nations is measurement validity. Multi national assessment of the same construct usually involves the use of presumably equivalent translations of measures, originally developed and validated for use in specific languages. Geisinger (1994) warns that even when measuring populations that share the same language, the same measure may be inadequate, or produce different results. This may occur since different groups of people who may the same language may be very different in their experiences.

Levels of SWB are usually assessed using self report measures. Due to the subjective nature of self reporting, cross cultural researchers should deal with the question of to what extent the basic interpretation of these self reports could be considered identical across nations. Simply put, one wonders whether the term life satisfaction bears the same meaning for people around the world. Interestingly, Scollon et al (2002) found evidence for a strong two-factor structure for the affective component of SWB. It appears that the affective components of SWB, negative and positive may be universal. In a review of cross cultural comparisons of SWB, Diener, Oishi and Lucas (2003) concluded that while cross cultural research on SWB is encouraging one needs to be aware of multiple processes that can differentially influence individuals from different cultures.

One approach to multicultural measurement of SWB is to compare the relative influence of correlates of SWB. Among the correlates that were found to be positively associated with higher levels of SWB are political stability, economic health and development, cultural homogeneity, civil rights, and individualism, (Deiner, Diener & Diener, 1995; Diener, Oishi and Lucas, 2003; Diener & Oishi, in press).

Veenhoven (1993) reported the results of an international survey of SWB in 55 nations. The survey used a combined standardized score of SWB from four different measures. U.S. participants reported levels of SWB that were one standard deviation above the international average. Israelis, in comparison, reported SWB levels that were about equal to the survey's international average. The differences between levels of SWB may stem from Israel's constant involvement in a political military conflict and the inevitable lack of sense of personal security. Other possibilities for the differences

between the two nations may include higher levels of individualism and stronger economic health in the U.S. (Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995).

Multicultural Perspectives of Humor. Humor is universal. People from all cultures use humor. Correlates of humor such as laughter and smiling are also prevalent across all cultures around the world. The current study takes a universal approach to humor. I therefore suggest that despite obvious cultural differences in content, forms, and delivery techniques humor serves the same functions in most, if not all cultures. Ziv (1988) notes that despite surface differences in jokes and other expressions of humor, there are several functions of humor that appear to be universal. Humor expressions around the world seem to include aggressive humor, intellectual humor, sexual humor, social humor, and humor as a defense mechanism.

Expressions of humor go hand in hand with other characteristics of the culture. In a review of humor and its functions is the U.S. Nilsen et al. (1988) note that much of American humor deals with the complexities of capitalism. An example for such humor can be found in a cartoon appearing in the Daily New Yorker calendar (2004). The cartoon shows a lemonade-stand with a sign indicating that "lemonade for 25 cents". On the other side if the street the carton shows a much larger lemonade-stand with a sign declaring "Starbucks Lemonade".

An additional aspect of American humor according to Nilsen et al. is the tendency to use aggressive humor to exclude outsiders. Nilsen et al. base this conclusion on the commonness of state specific jokes that have individuals from other states in the U.S. as the aim for ridicule. As noted earlier, Americans are highly individualistic. It is therefore

not surprising that many American jokes carry the theme of differentiating an individual from the majority to make the individual feel unique.

Regarding coping humor, Nilsen et al. (1988) note that Americans tend to look back on traumatic events and laugh about them. Another interesting observation made by Nilsen et al. is that Americans are reluctant to joke about "real" flaws such as alcoholism, dishonesty, or mental illnesses to avoid making their audience feel uncomfortable.

Not surprisingly, much of Israeli humor has its roots in Jewish humor. According to Oring (1983), the term "Jewish humor" originates from the Jewish history of suffering, rejection, and despair. The fact that Jews tend to laugh and joke in difficult times could indicate their unique affiliation with humor. Some view the source of Jewish humor as a counter reaction to anti-semitism in the Diaspora (Cohen, 1994). In a fascinating qualitative study, Landman (1962) analyzed Jewish writings and found that Jewish humor blossomed between the 18th and 20th centuries, a period of time during which anti semitism reached its peack. Landman notes that Jewish humor is almost completely lacking in ancient times and in recent years where levels of threatening anti Semitism are considerably lower. That is, in a sense, one could say that Jewish humor stems from assimilating to a hostile non-Jewish world (Juni & Katz, 2001).

Ziv (1988) notes that Israeli humor carries new characteristics that are distinct from the "old" Jewish humor and that have developed from the creation of the "new Jew" in Israel. Such changes follow from the transition from the persecuted and helpless Jew in the Diaspora to the independent proud "Israeli". This transition involved changes from self disparagement humor to aggressive humor, which is probably hallmark of Israeli humor. As noted earlier, national humor styles tend to parallel other aspects of the culture.

It is not surprising therefore that aggressiveness is probably one of the most defining attributes of Israelis.

Regarding humor as a coping mechanism in Israel, features of the classic Jewish coping humor are still very much apparent in modern Israeli humor. One notable change however, is that unlike Diaspora Jews, Israelis do not like to make fun of themselves as individuals. Much of the Israeli humor is based on making fun of Israelis as collective, addressing corruption, incompetence, and in indifference in the Israeli society and the administration.

It appears that the American and Israeli Societies differ in the main variables relevant to this study, namely sense of humor and levels of SWB. It not surprising that Americans report higher average levels of SWB than Israelis. Such differences may evolve as, noted earlier, from the constant terror threat in Israel is from relative hardship vis-à-vis life in Israel. Similarly, it is quite natural that different styles of national humor developed in the two nations. Humor doesn't develop in a void. It is developed as part of dialogue between individuals and their surrounding. Humor is, therefore, influenced by specific circumstances, culture, language, religion and history. However, whether or not differences in humor and levels of SWB manifest in different patterns of relationships between humor and life satisfaction, and to different levels of use of humor as means of coping with life events is currently very much is currently very much unexplored in psychological research. Exploring such possible differences is very much the goal of the current study.

The Current Study

The review of the literature on Subjective Well-Being revealed that cognitive and affective components of SWB are associated with, and influenced by various predictors such as life events. These factors appear to influence temporal fluctuations in levels of SWB. At the same time individual levels of SWB seem to be stable across long periods of time and a variety of situations. The stable patterns of SWB in individuals seem to be related to personality characteristics.

The review of the literature on humor supports the conclusion that humor is a positive personality characteristic. Some of the findings presented earlier suggest that some dimensions of sense of humor may serve as coping, or a defense mechanism that enables individuals to perceive the funny, witty, amusing, or ridiculous aspects of various difficult or stressful situations.

The current study suggests that sense of humor and particularly coping humor serve as moderators of the relationship between negative life events and SWB. Specifically, I maintain that high levels of sense of humor and coping humor may be one of the differentiating factors between people whose life satisfaction drops following negative life events and those whose life satisfaction levels remains relatively resistant to such events.

Hypotheses. Levels of SWB will be negatively associated with negative life events.

Coping humor is conceptualized as one dimension of sense of humor, or as a tendency to use humor in difficult situations. Therefore, sense of humor and coping humor will be positively associated with each other.

Sense of humor and coping humor will be positively associated with levels of SWB.

I conceptualize sense of humor and coping humor as trait-like qualities, and therefore relatively resistant to temporal changes such as life events. Therefore, the current study will explore whether negative life events are associated with sense of humor and coping humor. One possibility is that people with a high proportion of negative life events may show lower levels of sense of humor in comparison to people with low proportion of negative life events.

Sense of humor and coping humor will have moderating effects on the relationship between negative life events and SWB.

Regarding the multicultural comparison between Americans and Israelis, the current study will follow a model suggested by Van de Vijer and Leung (2001). The authors suggest that cross cultural studies in psychology follow a classification based on two dimensions. The first dimension relates to the existence of contextual variables such as gender, psychological characteristics, education, and SES. The second dimension relates to whether the multi-cultural aspect of the study is exploratory or hypothesis-testing in nature.

According to this model the current study is an *ecological linkage* type which is characterized by the existence of contextual variables and the absence of specific hypotheses regarding potential observed differences between the cultures. The purpose of such studies is to search for explanatory variables for observed differences.

From a multicultural perspective the goal of the current study is to explore whether patterns of relationships between humor, negative life events, and SWB differ for Americans and Israelis.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and thirty one American and Israeli participants were recruited by graduate students from the University of Massachusetts. 130 participants (the American sample) were recruited from the University of Massachusetts on a voluntary basis, in exchange for course credit. 81 participants (The Israeli sample) were recruited from Haifa University in Israel on a voluntary basis.

Procedure

Participants from the American and Israeli samples completed questionnaires on life satisfaction, life events, sense of humor, and coping humor. In addition, all participants completed a demographic questionnaire. The American sample completed the task in a psychology laboratory in the University of Massachusetts. The Israeli sample completed the task at Haifa University, Israel. The two samples completed identical versions of the questionnaires in English and Hebrew respectively. In order to control for possible biased responses in self reported life satisfaction, all participants completed the life satisfaction measure first. Furthermore, half of the participants completed the humor and coping humor measures before they completed the life events inventory. The other half completed the humor and coping humor measure after completing the life event inventory.

Measures

Creation and Appreciation of Humor Scale (Ziv, 1984). This scale includes 14 items, half measuring humor appreciation and half measuring humor creation. Answers

are given on a 7-point likert-scale ranging from1, strongly agree and 7, strongly disagree. Examples of items are "*I laugh easily*" (humor appreciation), and "*when I with my friends I like to make them laugh"* (humor creation). A global score for sense of humor is obtained by summing the scores for all 14 items. In addition, the separate subscale scores for humor creation and humor appreciation are obtained by summing the scores for the 7 items in each sub scale. Ziv (1988) reports Cornbach's alpha reliability of .61 for the appreciation scale and .73 for the creation scale. Ziv (1984) found test-retest reliability of .76 with a three month gap between administrations. The scale was validated on a large group of Israeli students using humor measures such as cartoon apperception and peer humor reports. Pearson product moment correlation coefficients between this scale and other humor measures ranged from .3 to .8 (Ziv, 1984).

Coping Humor Scale (CHS) (Martin, & Lefcourt, 1983). The CHS includes seven items assessing the degree to which individuals use humor as a means of coping with stressful or negative life events. Responses for each item are given on a 4-point likert-scale, between 1, strongly disagree and 4, strongly agree. Examples for items are: "*I have often found that my problems have been greatly reduced when I tried to find something funny in them*", "*I usually look for something comical to say when I am in tense situations*". The total score is obtained by summing the scores from all six items, with a possible range of 7 to 28. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was .61, with item-total correlations ranging from .11 to .51. Validation was done using other general measures of humor with Pearson product moment coefficients ranging from .37 to .51 (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985). The SWLS includes 5 items measuring participants' global cognitive assessment of life as a whole. Responses for each item are given on a 7 point likert-scale, ranging from 1, strongly disagree and 7, strongly agree. Examples of items are "*I am satisfied with my life*" and "*In most ways my life is close to my ideal*". The total score is obtained by summing the ratings of the five items, which produces a possible range of 5 to 35. This scale has been used extensively on large international samples and is considered to have good psychometric properties (Diener and Fujita 1996). Cronbach's alpha coefficients for this scale ranged from 0.82 to .91 (Diener and Fujita, 1996).

Life events. Participants were asked to indicate their experiences during the previous 12 months with various life events on a 115- item life events checklist (28 positive events, 69 negative events, 21 neutral events). Items were selected from two widely used life events measures: the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Interview (PERI) Life Events Scale (Dohrewend et al., 1988) (102 items), and the College Undergraduate Stress Scale (CUSS), (Renner and Maekin, 1998) (13 items). The new combined checklist was intended to maximize base rates of responses from the sample of college undergraduates, and to balance the significance of the reports. The checklist consisted of very significant life events (e.g. "Child died", "Marriage"), as well as relatively mundane life events ("Aequired a pet", "Flunked a class"). Note that experiences in the checklist are, for the most part, objective referring to an event rather than to a subjective evaluation of the influence of the event (e.g. "Flunked a class" rather than "Received an unfair grade")

Demographic Information. Participants asked to complete a 20-item demographic questionnaire to provide information on citizenship, family background, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, martial status, income and residence. Necessary minor adjustments were made in demographic questions for the American and Israeli samples to accommodate for cultural differences (e.g. differences in the options in the ethnicity question).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Demographics

A total of 211 participants completed measures for the current study. Participants with missing data on a measure were dropped from the analyses involving this measure. Consequently, the number of participants in the analyses reported below varies somewhat.

The American sample included 130 participants (38 men and 92 women) and the Israeli sample included 81 participants (41 men and 40 women). The difference in the gender distribution in the two groups was significant $\chi 2_{(1)} = 15.22$, $p<0.01$. Because of this relatively large difference in gender distribution between the two samples all subsequent analyses were conducted with gender included as an independent variable.

A two (gender) by two (nationality) analysis of variance on age revealed a main effect of nationality $F_{(1,201)}=103.6$, $p<.0001$. Americans ($M=20.5$, $SD=2.2$) were younger than Israelis ($M=26.7$ $SD=6.1$). The analysis also revealed a marginal effect for gender $F_{(1,201)}=3.25$, $p<0.10$. Men ($M= 23.3$, $SD=4.1$) were slightly older than women ($M=22.5$, $SD=5.5$). Because of the relatively large age difference between the American and the Israeli samples all further analyses were reconducted with age as a covariate with no emerging differences.

Life Events

Following Dohrenwend et al. (1978), we performed a procedure in which different standardized weights based on relative negativity were assigned to the 69 negative life events to obtain an overall weighted negative life events score for each participant. The correlations between the number of negative life events and the weighted

total score for negative life events for the Israeli and American samples were .93. and .94 respectively. All relevant analyses were performed using both weighted and unweighted negative life events with no emerged differences. Therefore, all subsequent negative life events analyses are reported for the total unweighted number of negative life events.

A two (gender) by two (nationality) analysis of variance on total negative life events revealed a main effect for nationality, $F_{(1,202)}=6.82$, $p<0.01$. Participants in the American sample reported more negative life events (M=5.9, SD=3.7) than participants in the Israeli sample (M=4.6, SD=36). The analysis revealed a marginal effect for gender, $F_{(1,202)}=3.59$, $p<0.1$. Men (M=5.8, SD=4.5) reported more negative life events than women (M=5.2, SD=3.3).

To explore differences in prevalence of specific negative life events in the two groups, a series of chi-square analyses were conducted for the relationship between nationality and the prevalence of each negative life event. The results of these analyses and the frequency with which each event was reported are summarized in Table 1. No significant prevalence differences between Americans and Israelis were obtained for 55 out of the 69 negative life events. Eleven negative life events were reported more frequently by the participants in the American sample, and 3 negative life events were reported more frequently by participants in the Israeli sample.

Table 1.

Prevalence of Negative Life Events for Israelis and Americans

	Nationality					
Life Event	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Had problems in school	76	35.2	44	33.8	32	39.5
3. Had a class you hated *	161	76.3	113	86.9	48	59.3
4. Flunked a class	43	19.9	26	20	17	21
5. Confrontations with professors	21	9.7	14	10.8	7	8.6
6. Failed school or training program	6	2.8	0	0	6	7.4
7. Did not graduate from school*	8	3.7	2	1.5	6	7.4
8. Changed jobs for a worse one	16	7.6	10	7.7	6	7.4
9. Had trouble with a boss	26	12.3	17	13.1	9	11.1
10. Demoted at work	2	0.9	2	1.5	0	0
11. Found that you were *not* going to be promoted	10	4.7	5	3.8	5	6.2
12. Conditions at work got worse	19	9	12	9.2	7	8.6
13. Laid off	8	3.7	3	2.3	5	6.2
14. Competing or performing in public	58	27.5	34	26.2	24	29.6
15. Took on a greatly increased working load*	92	43.6	67	51.5	25	30.9
17. Engagement was broken	2	0.9	1	0.8	1	1.2
18. Relationship with spouse\partner changed for the worse	28	13.3	21	16.2	7	8.6
19. Separation from spouse\partner	32	15.2	18	13.8	14	17.3
21. Infidelity	13	6.0	11	8.5	2	2.5
22. Troubles with in-laws	5	2.4	1	0.8	4	4.9
23. Spouse/partner died	0	0	0	0	0	0
24. Concerns about being pregnant*	28	13.0	26	20	2	2.5
25. Concerns about your partner being pregnant	6	2.8	4	3.1	2	2.5
26. Miscarriage or stillbirth	1	0.5	1	0.8	0	0
27. Found out that you or your partner cannot have children	1	0.5	1	1.8	0	0

28. Child died	0	0	0	0	0	0
30. Someone stayed on in the household After they were expected to leave*	7	3.2	7	5.4	0	0
31. Serious family argument with someone other than spouse*	60	27.8	47	36.2	13	16
32. Family member other than spouse or child dies	32	15.2	22	16.9	10	12
33. Moved to a worse residence or neighborhood	15	7.1	7	5.4	8	9.9
34. Unable to move after expecting to be able to move	12	5.7	5	3.8	7	8.6
36. Lost a home through fire, flood, or other disaster	0	0	0	0	0	0
37. Physically assaulted	8	3.7	7	5.4	1	1.2
38. Robbed	6	2.8	3	2.3	3	3.7
39. Raped	1	1	6.6	0. 8	0	0
40. Sexually harassed	14	6.6	10	7.7	4	4.9
41. Got into a physical fight*	20	9.3	18	13.8	2	2.5
42. Accident with no injuries*	44	20.9	33	25.4	11	13.6
43. Involved in a law suit*	10	4.7	3	2.3	7	8.6
44. Accused of something for which a person could be sent to jail	9	4.3	8	6.2	1	1.2
45. Lost drivers license	5	2.4	5	3.8	0	0
46. Arrested	4	1.9	3	2.3	1	1.2
47. Went to jail	1	0.5	1	0.8	0	0
48. Didn't get out of jail when expected	0	0	0	0	0	0
48. Got involved in a court case	13	6.0	11	8.5	2	2.5
49. Convicted of a crime	2	.9	1	0.8	1	1.2
50. Substance abuse	22	10.2	14	0.8	8	9.9
52. Foreclosure of a mortgage or a loan	0	0	0	0	0	0
53. Repossession of items bought on an installment plan	1	0.5	0	0	1	1.2
54. Took a cut in wage or salary without demotion	10	4.7	4	3.1	6	7.4
55. Suffered financial loss	12	5.7	5	3.8	7	8.6
56. Went on welfare*	8	3.8	1	0.8	7	8.6
57. Did not get an expected wage or salary increase	16	7.6	12	9.2	4	4.9

58. Was not able to take a vacation	24	11.4	12	9.2	12	14.8
59. Dropped a hobby or recreational	39	18.5	22	16.9	17	21
60. Pet died	23	10.6	16	12.3	7	8.6
61. Broke up with a friend	57	27.0	32	24.6	25	30.9
62. Had a fight with a friend *	70	33.2	68	52.3	2	2.5
63. Problems with room/dorm mates*	69	32.7	66	50.8	3	3.7
64. Close friend died	7	3.3	6	4.6	1	1.2
65. Depression in your best friend*	47	22.3	36	27.7	11	13.6
66. Peer pressures*	41	19.4	34	26.2	7	8.6
67. Physical illness	35	16.6	25	19.2	10	12.3
68. Injury	22	10.4	16	12.3	6	7.4
69. Unable to get treatment for an illness or injury	3	1.4	2	1.5	1	1.2

*Life events for which the differences in the frequency reported by Israelis and Americans is significant at the $p<0.05$ level.

Subjective Well-Being

A two (nationality) by two (gender) analysis of variance on subjective well-being reveled no main effects. Thus, Israelis and Americans reported similar levels of SWB and men and women reported similar levels of SWB (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations).

Sense of Humor

A two (nationality) by two (gender) analysis of variance on sense of humor reveled no main effects. Thus, Israelis and Americans reported similar levels of sense of humor, and men and women reported similar levels of sense of humor (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations).

Coping Humor

A two (nationality) by two (gender) analysis of variance on coping humor was conducted and revealed a marginal nationality effect, $F_{(1,202)}=3.496$, $p<0.1$. Israelis

reported slightly higher levels of coping humor than Americans. The analysis revealed a significant gender effect $F_{(1,202)}=9.283$, $p<0.01$. Men reported higher levels of coping humor than women. (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations).

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviations for Israelis and Americans: Subjective well-being, Sense of Humor, and Coping humor

	Nationality					
	Americans		Israelis		Overall	
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Subjective well being						
Men	22.9	5.7	23.8	6.4	23.4	6.0
Women	24.1	6.2	24.9	5.1	24.3	6.0
Overall	23.8	6.1	24.3	5.8	24.0	6.0
Sense of humor						
Men	66.2	12.1	65.3	12.5	65.7	12.2
Women	67.9	13.1	66.8	9.3	67.6	11.4
Overall	67.5	12.1	66.0	11.7	66.9	11.7
Coping humor						
Men	17.0	3.0	18.3	3.2	17.7	3.2
Women	15.9	3.1	16.5	2.9	16.1	3.1
Overall	16.2	3.1	17.3	3.2	16.7	3.2

Bivariate Correlations

Correlations between the measures of negative life events, SWB, humor, sense of humor, and coping humor were calculated. Table 3 shows the inter-correlations between the measures. Because of the gender differences in coping humor and life events

correlations were first calculated separately for men and women. Correlations did not significantly differ due to gender and therefore, all correlations reported in Table 3 are combined for men and women. The inter-correlations show moderate association between humor and coping humor for both Israelis and Americans. As predicted, SWB was found to be moderately negatively associated with negative life events for the two groups combined. However, when calculated separately this association was only obtained for the American sample. Contrary to our hypothesis there was no relationship between humor or coping humor and SWB in either Israelis or Americans. Surprisingly, negative life events were positively associated with coping humor in Israelis and negatively associated with coping humor in Americans.

Table 3.

Bivariate correlations of Subjective Well-Being, Sense of Humor, Coping Humor, and Negative Life Events

VARIABLE	1	2	3	4
1. Subjective well being	____			
2. Sense of humor	a. .08 b. .08 c. .08	____		
3. Coping humor	a. .10 b. .11 c. .06	a. .34** b. .38** c. .31**	____	
4. Negative life events	a. -0.25** b. -0.33** c. -0.14	a. .00 b. -.10 c. .09	a. -.03 b. -.19* c. .25**	____

a– Overall, b. –American, c. - Israelis,

* P<0.05

** P<0.01

Regression Analyses

To explore further the relationship between the SWB and life events a multiple regression with SWB as the dependant variable was conducted. Specifically, this analysis was conducted to examine whether the nationality difference in the association between life events and SWB was significant and whether humor and coping humor had a moderating effect on the relationship between negative life events and SWB. Four main effect terms (negative life events, humor, coping humor, and nationality) and three interaction terms (nationality X negative life events, sense of humor x negative life events, and coping humor x negative life events) were entered as the predictors. Israeli nationality was coded as 1 and American nationality was coded as 0. Table 4 illustrates the results of the regression analysis. The results indicated that despite the fact that negative life events had a moderate negative association with SWB, when entered to the regression together with the other predictors, negative life events no longer significantly predicted SWB. No significant nationality and negative life events x nationality interaction was found. The results also indicated that neither sense of humor nor coping humor moderated the relationship between number of negative life events and life satisfaction.

Table 4.
Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Subjective Well-Being

Variable	B	SE B	β	ρ
Humor	-.072	.068	-.014	.915
Coping humor	.151	.221	.086	.495
Negative life events	-.021	.176	-.131	.242
Nationality	-.308	.854	-.025	.719
Nationality X Negative life events	-.286	.223	-.141	.201
Humor X Negative life events	.055	.009	.252	.534
Coping humor X Negative life events	-.124	.032	-.016	.969

To further explore the pattern of association between coping humor and negative life events obtained for the Israeli and American samples, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with coping humor as the dependent measure. Negative life events, nationality, and the nationality X negative life events interaction were entered as predictors. Israeli nationality was coded as 1 and American nationality was coded as 0. Table 5 illustrates the results of the regression analysis. Overall, negative life events were positively associated with coping humor. The results also indicated that Israelis reported more coping humor than Americans. However, these effects were qualified by a

significant nationality x negative life events interaction. As illustrated by the correlations in Table 3, negative life events were positively associated with coping humor for Israelis and negatively associated with coping humor for Americans.

Table 5.

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Coping Humor

Variable	B	SE B	β	ρ
Negative life events	.239	.101	.265	.018 *
Nationality	-1.20	.486	-.173	.014 *
Nationality X Negative life events	-.41	.127	-.348	.002 *

* $p<0.01$

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The goal of the current study was to explore the relationship between four psychological constructs, humor, coping humor, negative life events, and life satisfaction.

Overall, Americans reported a slightly higher number of negative life events and overall negativity than Israelis. However, somewhat surprisingly the majority of negative life events were reported in remarkably similar frequencies in both samples. First, it was hypothesized that negative life events will predict lower levels of life satisfaction. The results supported this prediction only for the American participants. It was found that, for Americans, both number and relative negativity of life events in the year prior to participation predicted lower levels of life satisfaction. The results for the American sample are consistent with those of several large scale surveys. For example, a recent 22-year longitudinal study found that self reported decline in physical health was associated with decline in life satisfaction (Suh, Diener,& Fujita 1996). Contemporary thinking on the topic suggests that although individuals have a genetic temperamental life satisfaction set point, environmental circumstances can have substantial short and moderate term influence on life satisfaction (Fujita & Diener, 2005).

The results did not support a relationship between number and valence of negative life events and life satisfaction in the Israeli sample. As noted earlier, research has recently challenged traditional thinking on the influence of negative life events on mood, life satisfaction, and psychological functioning (Bonnano et al., 2004; Lindstrom, 2002.). Cross-cultural findings that point to variation in the ways individuals from different nations cope with hardship are now beginning to emerge. Such recent findings

include variation in how fast individuals from different cultures complete the grieving process (Bonnano, 2005), in prediction of coping with depression (Flec et al., 2005), and in differences in optimism in light of negative life events (Ji et al., 2004).

The current study is novel in it being the first to examine the relationship between general evaluations of life satisfaction and negative life events in Israel. Among the handful of related studies, researchers have found that everyday life hassles do not have an effect on life satisfaction in Jewish Israelis (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2003).

As predicted, sense of humor and coping humor were found to be moderately associated. The results suggest that the two are related yet clearly separated constructs. This finding is consistent with past reports of the relationship between the Coping Humor Scale and other measures of humor (Martin and Lefcourt, 1983). Moreover, the pattern of intercorrelations suggests that coping humor, and not general sense of humor, was inversely associated with negative life events for Israelis and Americans. In other words more negative life events predicted more coping humor in Israelis and less coping humor in Americans, but did not predict sense of humor in general in both groups. This finding provides further support for the notion that humor is a multidimensional psychological construct, and that coping humor in particular is the dimension associated with dealing with negative life events.

Based on prior evidence regarding the relationship between humor and psychological well being, it was hypothesized that humor, and particularly coping humor, would be positively associated with life satisfaction. The results did not support this hypothesis for either Israelis or Americans. At the very least, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that such a relationship may not exist. However, it is also

possible the relationship depends on other psychological moderators not measured in the current study. Recently, Kuiper and Borowicz-Sibenik (2005) demonstrated that the facilitative effect of humor on psychological well-being depended on moderating variables such as agency and communion. Specifically, they found that although overall higher levels of self esteem and lower levels of depressive symptoms were associated with high levels of coping humor, for those participants with a combination of high levels of agency and communion, this relationship disappeared. In this context Kuiper et al. (2004) recently suggested that some aspects of coping humor may even be associated with lower levels of well-being. For example, in a multidimensional examination of how humor is used to cope with hardship, self defeating humor was found to be detrimental to psychological well-being and was associated with low self esteem and high levels of anxiety and depression. Future research should focus on further understanding of different types of coping humor and the specific ways in which they influence or relate to psychological well being.

The lack of a relationship between humor and life satisfaction in the current study may also stem from the way in which life satisfaction was conceptualized and measured. The current study utilized a global cognitive approach to life satisfaction. It is possible that sense of humor and coping humor are related to affective and emotional aspects of life satisfaction (i.e. negative and positive affect) rather than to cognitive appraisals of life satisfaction. Thus, it is possible that while coping humor does not influence the cognitive appraisal of satisfaction with life, it does influence the amount of negative and positive affect individuals feel as a result of this appraisal

It was predicted that sense of humor and coping humor will moderate the relationship between life events and life satisfaction. This hypothesis was not supported. Again, the simple explanation is that such moderation may not exist. However, it is also possible that certain methodological and measurement problems made it difficult to detect such moderation. The current study took a survey approach to asking participants to identify negative life events from an extensive list. It did not, however, ask participants to identify the degree to which they found these events distressing or difficult. By doing so I chose to explore the relationship between negative life events and life satisfaction directly under the well established assumption that these events cause distress (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Dorenwhend, 1978). It is, therefore, possible that coping humor moderates the relationship between negative life events and life satisfaction only for those events explicitly identified as stressful or difficult.

Other studies that measured the influence of negative life events on well being have generally dealt with exploring which events were most distressful for participants in two ways. First, researchers often ask participants to indicate how negative they felt each life event was and the level of distress they felt due to this specific life event (e.g. Diener 1993; Sedilitz & Diener, 1993). A second approach commonly taken to understanding correlates of negative life events is to use participants' free recall of the negative life events in a given period of time prior to participation (Seidilitz & Diener, 1993). The benefits of such an approach are that it facilitates report of the more subjectively significant life events. This approach is based on the assumption that the more mundane hassles are not as available in a recall task when compared to the recognition approach that was utilized in the current study. However, by asking participants to recall negative

life events we limit the investigation to those events that participants choose to report in a given moment. It is important to note that both reports of relative distress and free recall of negative life events are highly influenced by momentary mood at the time of the recall task (Blaney, 1986). I believe that by giving participants an extensive list of possible life events and asking them to indicate which of the following they have experienced I was able to get a less biased and more accurate account of the negative events they actually experienced.

As noted earlier the most surprising finding in the current study was that Israelis reported slightly higher levels of coping humor in general and that more negative life events were associated with more coping humor for Israelis and less coping humor for Americans. Due to the correlational nature of the current study it is impossible to verify the direction of this association. It is unreasonable to assume that coping humor can actually influence the number of negative life events. However, it is important to note that despite the fact that life events were reported using recognition rather than a recall task, the possibility that levels of coping humor had an influence on the number of life events participants reported should not ruled out.

I maintain that the results of the current study present preliminary and unique support for the idea that the use of humor to cope with negative life events is moderated by culture. There are several plausible interpretations for this finding. First, I will consider a national cultural explanation. Naturally, the vast majority of the Israeli sample was Jewish. As discussed in the introduction, several theorists have pointed to the fact that coping humor is very much the hallmark of Jewish humor (Oring, 1983; Landam, 1962). As noted earlier, Nilsen et al. (1988) maintained that Americans tend to look back

on traumatic events and laugh about them. It is therefore somewhat surprising that for participants in the American sample, negative life events were negatively associated with levels of coping humor.

For comparison reasons the sample included college students from both countries. However, on average, Israeli college students tend to be considerably older than the American college students. Despite the fact that we controlled for age in the statistical analyses it is possible that, at least to some extent, the negative association between negative life events and coping humor reflects age and developmental stage of the American sample. Certainly, more research with older individuals can shed light on the generalizabilty of this inverse pattern of relationship between coping humor and negative life events for the two groups.

Because of the difference in gender distribution in the American and Israeli samples all analyses were conducted with gender as an independent variable. Overall, the pattern of results was similar for both men and women in the majority of the examined variables. The only significant gender effect that emerged in the results was that women reported slightly fewer negative life events than men. This result was found for both Israelis and Americas. This finding is inconsistent with a large sample survey study that found that women tend to report negative life events in certain domains more frequently than men (Matud, 2004). It is possible that self-report life events questionnaires bias in the specific life events items contributed to gender differences in number of negative life events reported.

One limitation of the current study has to do with the fact that its sample was comprised of college students only. It is important to note that we should not be

concerned with the population studied per se, but rather with the fact that by studying college students the investigation was somewhat limited to the type of negative life events that are more typical to young college students.

Another limitation that stems from the restricted age range has to do with the notion that that learning how to cope with negative life events may involve a life long process. More specifically, it is possible that the ability to use coping humor as well as other mature protective defense mechanisms in an adaptive way develops later in adulthood (Vaillant, 2002). Future investigations should look at middle-age and older adults in comparison to younger adults to investigate whether sense of humor and coping humor indeed become more of a protective personality characteristic with age.

In general research on psychological correlates of life events can take one of two approaches. One approach is to study large groups of people that are either representative of a culture, a country, or an age group. Inevitably, in such samples extremely negative life events will have generally low base rate. On the other hand, such samples will have extremely high base rate of life events that are typical to the groups sampled. For example, in the current study over 80% of the participants in both groups reported that they had a class they hated. The other approach for studying the psychological effect of life events is to sample specific populations who experienced extreme hardship such as bereavement (e.g. Bonanno, 2004; Wortman and Silver, 1982), major illness or injury (Forsberg-Warleby et al., 2004), severe accidents (Gillen et al., 2004; Brickman, Boats, & and Janof- Bulman, 1978) and, most recently, large scale atrocities such as the 9/11 attack in the U.S. (Friedberg, Adonis, & Von Bergen, 2005), and the Tsunami that struck south-east Asia (Gorman, 2005). I suggest that these two approaches should supplement

rather than compete with each other. On the one hand, exploring how coping humor helps to deal with extreme hardship is crucial. On the other hand, the majority of individuals deal on a daily basis with a plethora of hassles such as getting a ticket, arguing with significant others, and failing classes. Therefore future research on the relationship between humor and life events should focus on major negative life events as well as everyday hassles.

As for psychological effects of humor in general and coping humor in particular, future research should focus on gaining better understanding of how, and for whom humor facilitates well being. In particular, it may be intriguing to explore whether coping humor could be utilized in psychotherapeutic interventions and to understand better its relationship to other personality dimensions.

Finally, the current study provided an additional example of the potential benefits and the importance of cross cultural and particularly cross national psychological research. Despite the difficulties in conducting and interpreting results from a cross national investigation I was able to show that, not surprisingly, individuals from different nations share many psychological similarities but also show fascinating differences.

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